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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 000016

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: OBSERVERS ENDORSE ELECTION RESULTS; NEW CABINET TO  
BE SWORN IN JANUARY 6

REF: DHAKA 1361 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador James Moriarty, reasons 1.5 (b&d)

11. (SBU) Summary: Official results confirm that the Grand Alliance led by Awami League President Sheikh Hasina captured a stunning 262 seats out of the 299 contested in Bangladesh's December 29 parliamentary elections. Foreign and domestic observers agree that the elections were the most free, fair and credible in the country's history, despite some minor irregularities. The Grand Alliance MPs were sworn in January 3 and 4. The 32 MPs-elect from the rival BNP-led coalition have yet to be sworn in but have indicated they will eventually join the Parliament. Sheikh Hasina will be sworn in as Prime Minister January 6; her new cabinet (yet to be announced) will be sworn in the same day. It seems likely the new cabinet will be small by Bangladeshi standards and will include a number of new faces. Sheikh Hasina will likely retain key portfolios as prime minister. End summary.

IT'S OFFICIAL: AWAMI LEAGUE SWEEPS THE BOARD  
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12. (U) Official results confirm that the Grand Alliance led by Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina won an overwhelming majority in Parliament, capturing a stunning 262 seats out of the 299 contested in the December 29 elections. The Awami League itself won 230 seats (representing more than the two-thirds parliamentary majority required to enact constitutional amendments). Its main partner, the Jatiya Party led by former President Hossain Mohamed Ershad, won 27 seats, while two smaller allies captured 3 and 2 seats respectively. Although the alliance captured roughly 55 percent of the national vote, Bangladesh's "first past the post" system enabled the alliance's parliamentary sweep. The four-party alliance led by AL's main rival, the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP), captured about 37 percent of the national vote, but won only 32 seats (of which 29 went to BNP and 2 to Jamaat-e-Islami, its main coalition partner).

UNANIMOUS THUMBS-UP FROM OBSERVERS  
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13. (U) Although minor administrative irregularities and incidents occurred, overall the December 29 parliamentary elections were the freest, fairest and most credible in Bangladesh's history, and were conducted in a secure, peaceful environment. This was the unanimous conclusion of the panoply of international (more than 350) and domestic (more than 180,000) observers who monitored the elections process. The observer groups included Embassy officials, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the EU, the Commonwealth and the Asia Foundation, among others. As the EU's Chief Observer

said in a press statement: "Bangladeshi people turned out to vote in large numbers, and were able to do so in a peaceful environment. Minor technical difficulties aside, professionalism, transparency and credibility were the hallmarks of this election. The outcome of the election appears to reflect the will of the people of Bangladesh. Our observers did not report patterns of fraud in the process." All sides stressed the importance of resolving any elections complaints and challenges.

#### ELECTIONS-RELATED VIOLENCE: NOTHING LIKE 2001

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¶4. (SBU) Despite pre-election fears from domestic and international observers that the 2008 polls would spark communal tensions or political violence on the scale witnessed in 2001, the December 29 elections and the ensuing days were largely peaceful. According to January 5 press reports, there were 10 deaths and close to 300 injuries in connection with pre- and post-electoral violence countrywide.

A large number of the victims were BNP supporters. In one or two cases, Hindu supporters of the BNP were reportedly targeted by supporters of the Awami League (AL). (Note: Hindus and members of other minority communities are considered to be reliable supporters of the Awami League. End note.) Local BNP leaders argue that such incidents were part of a larger campaign of intimidation against supporters of their party but most independent observers agreed that violence was usually a localized phenomenon and that it was difficult to disentangle politics from other motives like hooliganism and personal rivalries.

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#### GRAND ALLIANCE MPS SWORN IN...

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¶5. (U) 258 Grand Alliance MPs, including AL leader Sheikh Hasina and Jatiya Party leader Hosain Mohamed Ershad, took the oath of office before the Speaker of Parliament January 3 and 4. (Note: Both Hasina and Ershad had won 3 seats each. Prior to their swearing-in, each vacated two seats, for which by-elections will be held in February. End note.)

#### .. BNP AND ALLIES HESITATE

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¶6. (SBU) Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar invited the BNP and JI MPs-elect for swearing-in January 4, but neither party attended. According to a senior BP official, the alliance partners will meet January 7 to make a decision on whether or not to proceed with taking office. There is some indication the BNP will wait until after the Parliament has ratified the ordinances promulgated by the Caretaker Government before allowing MPs to take their seats. According to the Constitution, the MPs-elect have 90 days to take their oaths.

¶7. (SBU) Both BNP and JI still appear to be in shock at the magnitude of their defeat, and speculation is now rife over their future courses of action. Some BNP insiders are reportedly blaming JI and its "war crime" taint (i.e. allegations that current JI leaders committed atrocities during the 1971 war of liberation) for the defeat, while JI supporters attribute the electoral rout to the BNP's record of rampant corruption and abuse of power. Although Saluhiddin Quader Chowdhury, a senior BNP insider, told reporters January 4 that BNP will "support all the constructive activities of the government", the BNP has yet to officially announce its formal acceptance of the election results.

#### NEW CABINET TO BE SWORN IN JANUARY 6

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¶8. (C) Sheikh Hasina and her cabinet are scheduled to take the oath of office January 6. The composition of the new cabinet is still a closely-guarded secret. We have been told

to expect a small (by Bangladeshi standards) cabinet of 30-40 ministers. Sheikh Hasina is likely to retain several key portfolios as prime minister, including Home (internal) Affairs, and to appoint a mix of new faces and more experienced people.

ERSHAD-HASINA: THE DANCE CONTINUES  
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¶9. (C) Sheikh Hasina announced January 4 that AL presidium member Zillur Rahman would be AL's candidate for the (largely ceremonial) position of President of Bangladesh. Rahman played a key role in keeping the party together during Hasina's imprisonment and absence in 2007. His wife Ivy Rahman was killed in the August 21, 2004 terrorist attack on a party rally in which Hasina and other senior leaders were also injured. The move recognizes Rahman's contributions, but also infers AL's intention to keep the Presidency weak and beholden to the Prime Minister.

¶10. (C) The announcement dashed Ershad's publicly-stated hopes of taking the position himself, should the Grand Alliance come to power. Ershad's hope that AL would need JP support to form a government has proved unfounded, and -- in common with his political peers across the board -- he now is reduced to relying on Hasina's generosity, with no bargaining chips of his own. Ershad told the Embassy January 5 that he is being considered for 'election' as the Deputy Leader of Parliament soon after Zillur Rahman (the current incumbent) becomes President. Ershad also asserted that he may possibly become president following Rahman, at a later date.

COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) So far, Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League have handled the transition gracefully. While AL insiders worry they will be left out of the Cabinet, Hasina recognizes the need to show that her government will not simply be "old wine in new bottles." While the BNP shows some signs it understands it must look inside the party for the reasons for its defeat, some senior leaders remain intent upon trying to pursue narrow partisan interests. Hasina's first test will be forming a credible Cabinet. The focus will then turn to

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the Parliament's commitment to ratifying the 111 ordinances bequeathed by the Caretaker Government. We need to let the AL and Hasina know we will be watching this process closely in the coming days.

MORIARTY